

A *JALDI* book

Swapnasundari and the Magical Birds of Mithila

GEETA DHARMARAJAN

Line Drawings by
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To all the wonderful people with me in Katha.
Working together to make dreams come true! -GD



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nce upon a time, in the enchanted Kingdom of Mithila, there lived a beautiful princess called Swapnasundari. The Little Princess loved singing birds.

She filled her pretty gardens with lots and lots of birds. Everything she saw she turned into magical singing birds, with wings of many colours.



The people in her kingdom worked hard. Their wells were full, their rivers clean.

They would have been always happy ...

But for one thing. The Little Princess Swapnasundari would creep up to them and she would whisper ...

"Choomanthar!"

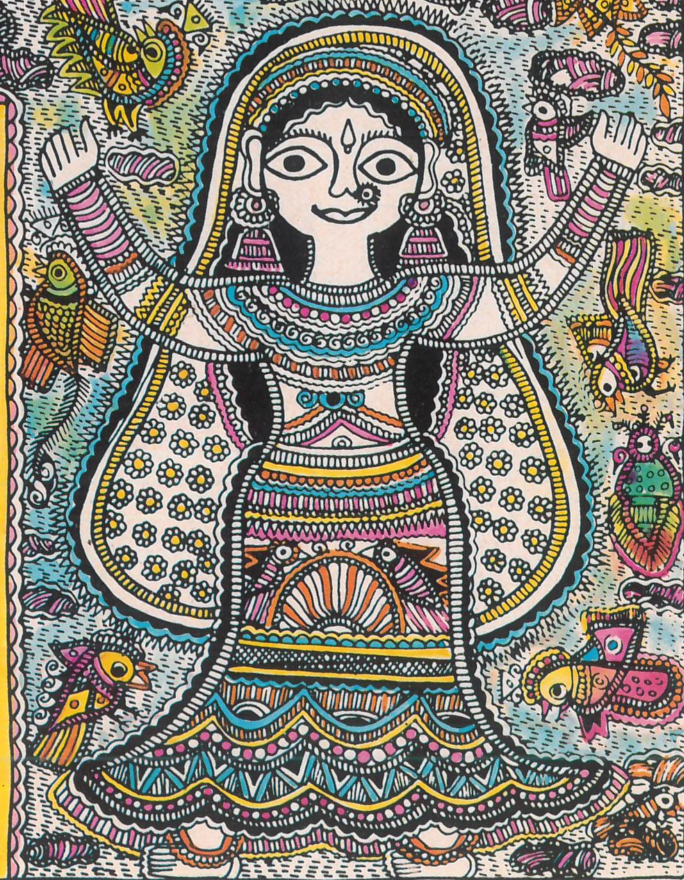


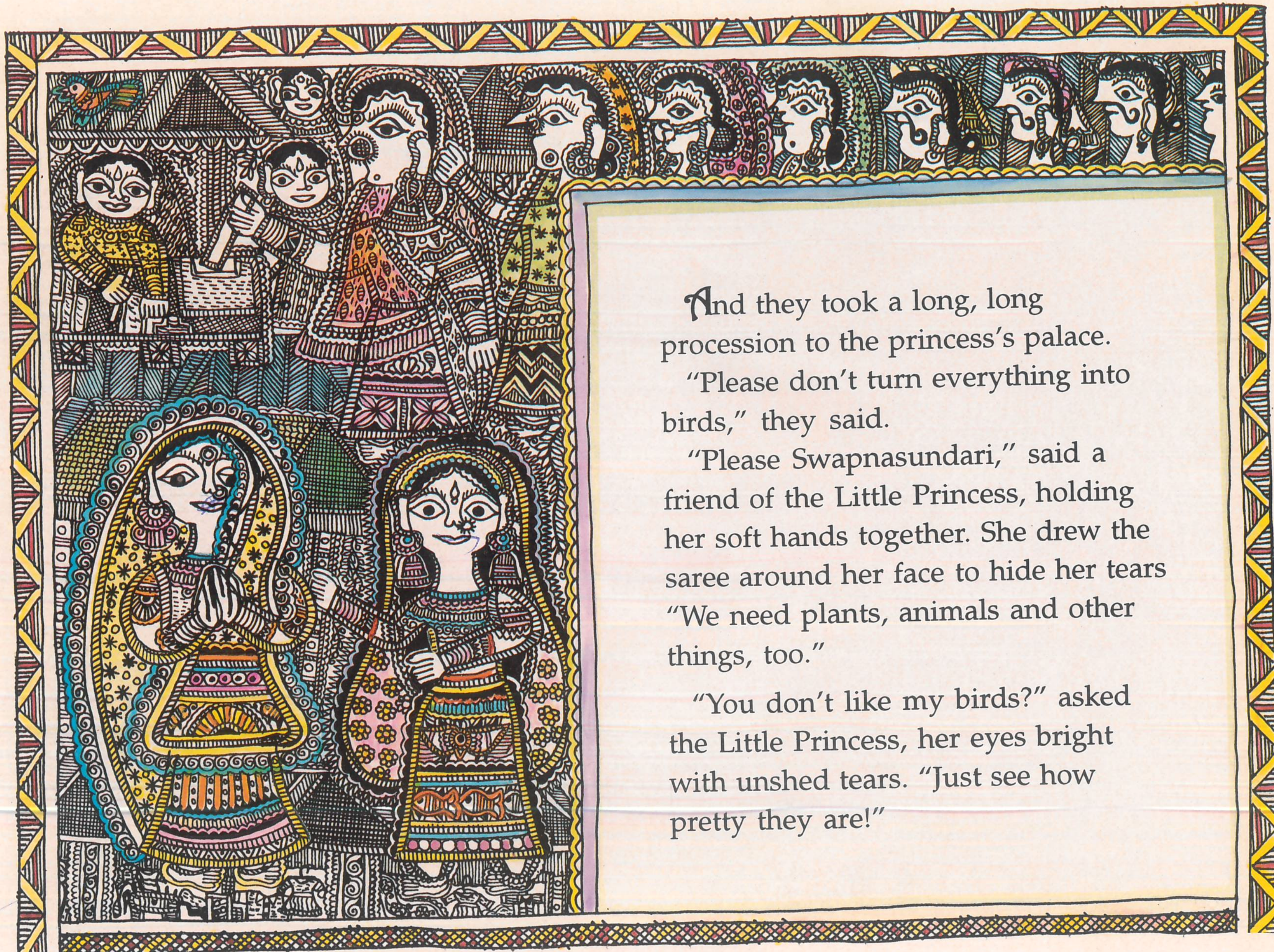
Fish, goat or cow, almost everything,
Was turned somehow into birds that sing!

"This is wonderful!" shouted Princess Swapnasundari. "Look! Birds, beautiful birds everywhere!"

But the people were so unhappy.

"What can we do with just birds? Can we eat them ? Or read them? Or play with them?" they asked.





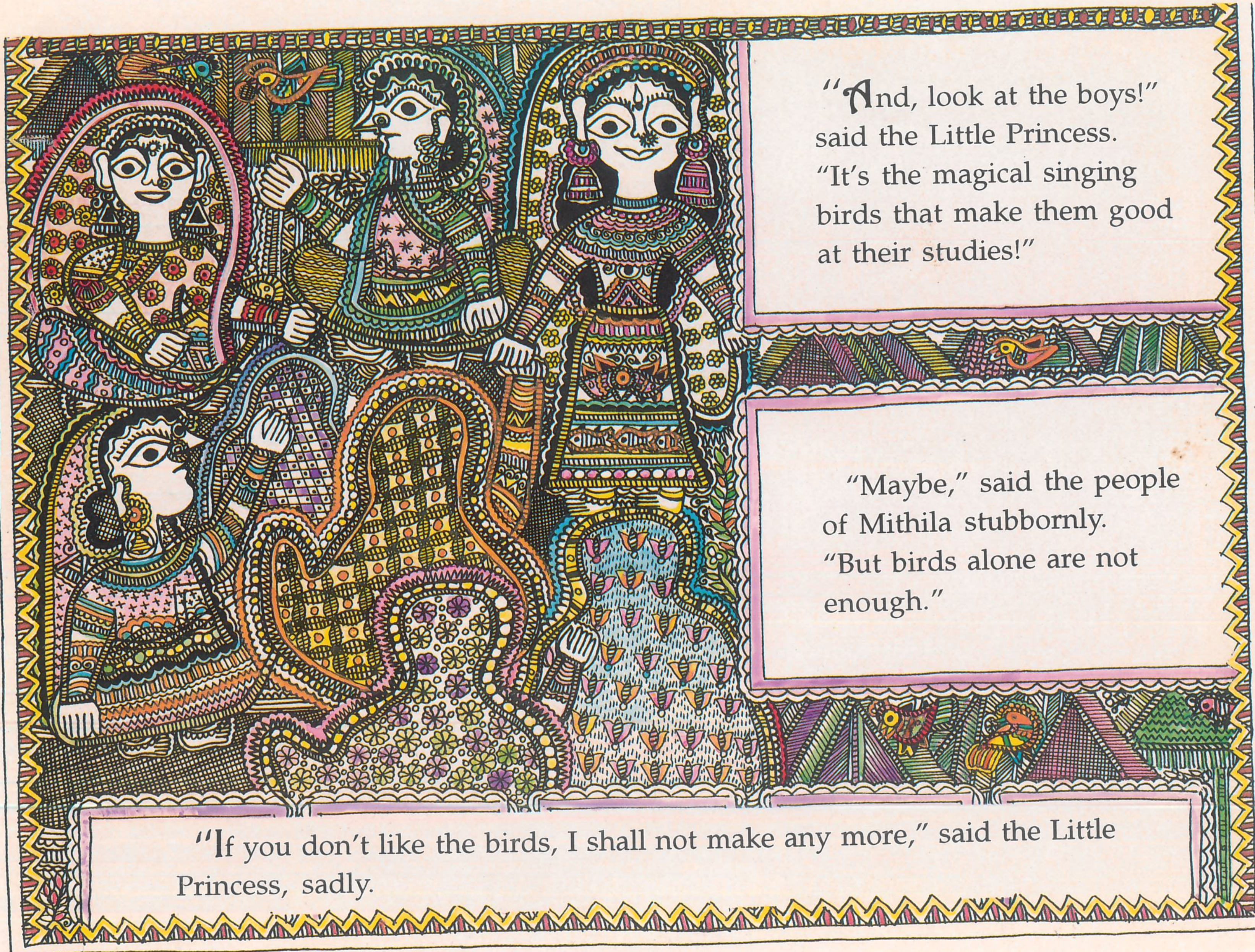
And they took a long, long procession to the princess's palace.

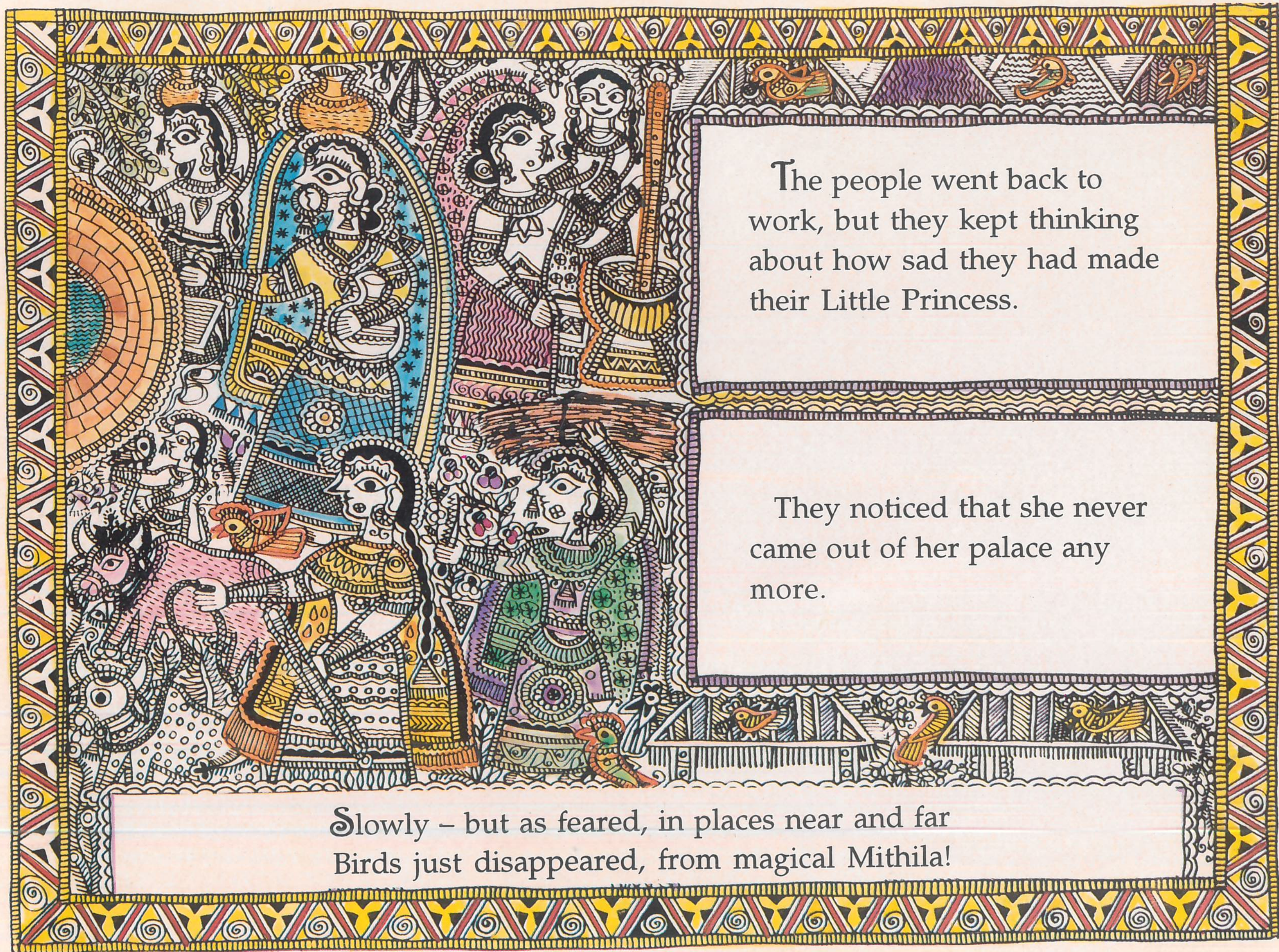
"Please don't turn everything into birds," they said.

"Please Swapnasundari," said a friend of the Little Princess, holding her soft hands together. She drew the saree around her face to hide her tears "We need plants, animals and other things, too."

"You don't like my birds?" asked the Little Princess, her eyes bright with unshed tears. "Just see how pretty they are!"




"And, look at the boys!" said the Little Princess. "It's the magical singing birds that make them good at their studies!"
"Maybe," said the people of Mithila stubbornly. "But birds alone are not enough."
"If you don't like the birds, I shall not make any more," said the Little Princess, sadly.

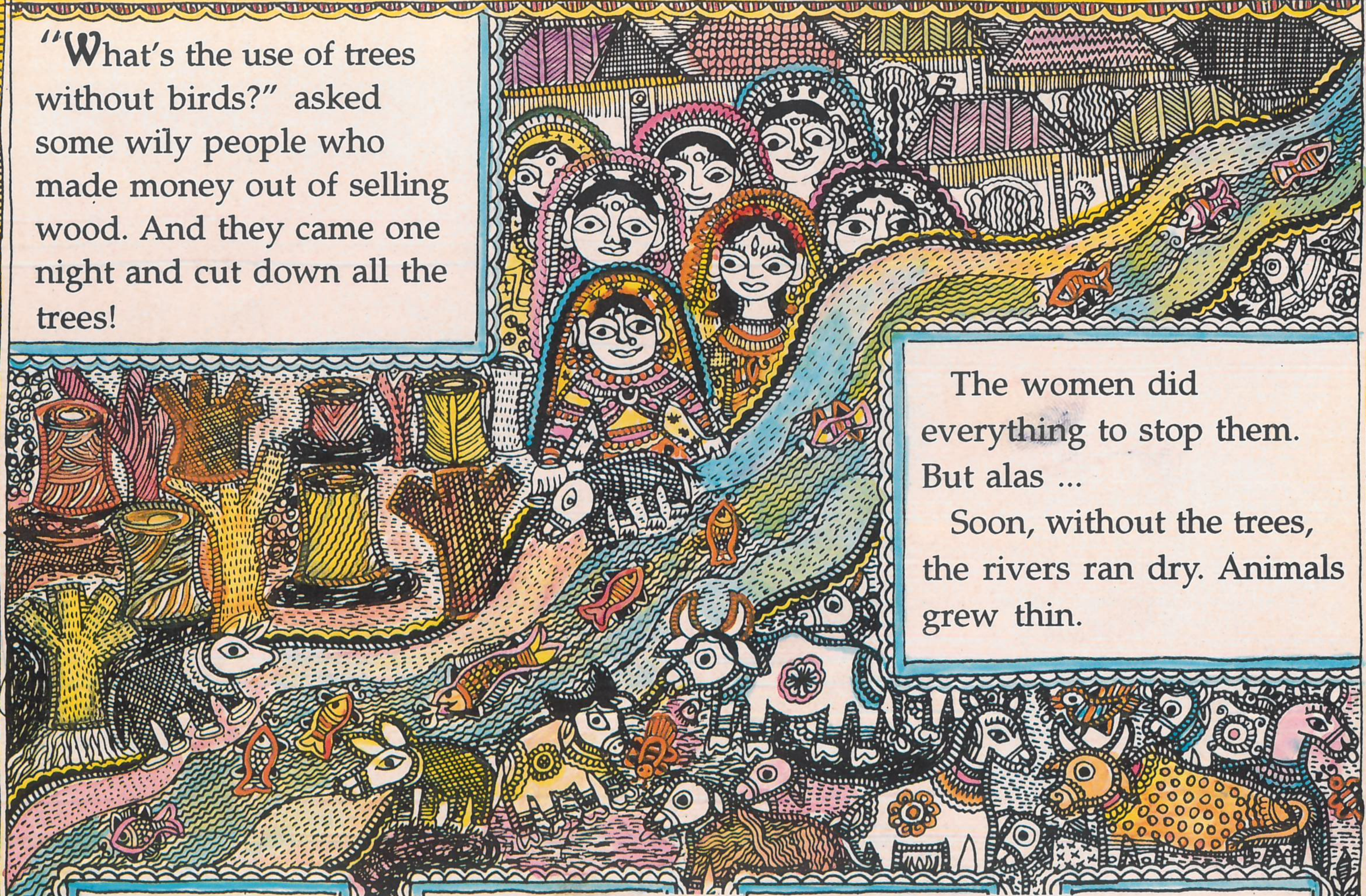

The people went back to work, but they kept thinking about how sad they had made their Little Princess.
They noticed that she never came out of her palace any more.
Slowly – but as feared, in places near and far
Birds just disappeared, from magical Mithila!

The women still sang as they ploughed the fields. But everyone knew their kingdom was not the same.

Without the birds with their wings of many colours, the kingdom looked so dull. "The birds made us happy," the women said.



Girls, boys, women, men, the blacksmith and cowherd,
They searched again and again – but could find just one bird!



"What's the use of trees without birds?" asked some wily people who made money out of selling wood. And they came one night and cut down all the trees!

The women did everything to stop them. But alas ...

Soon, without the trees, the rivers ran dry. Animals grew thin.

Singing birds Come back! Come back!
What magic words, will bring you back?

Without their trees, the people grew poorer and poorer. And the village money lender grew richer and richer.

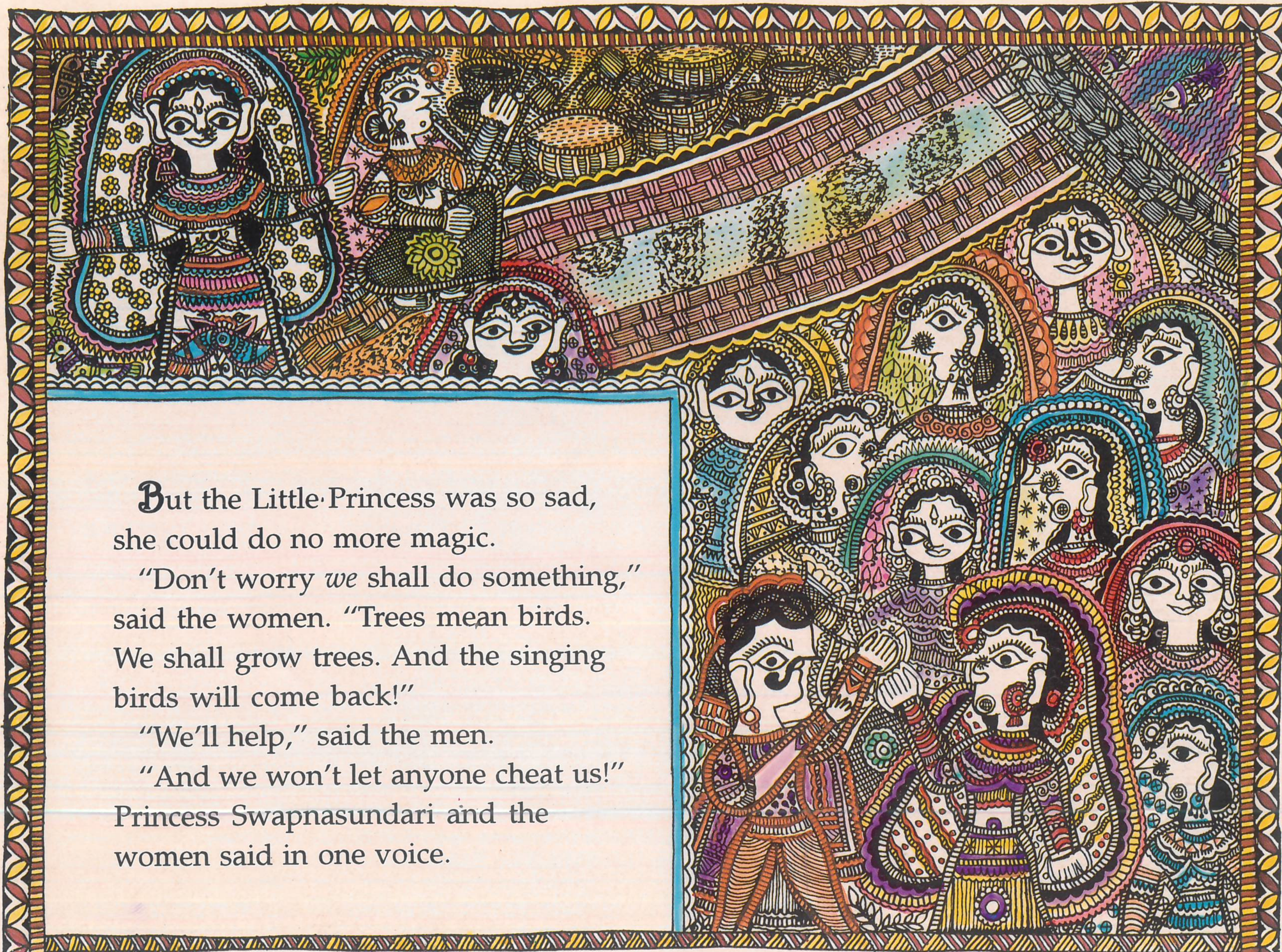
The women went to the Little Princess, in tears. "Please help us, Little Princess," they said. "We were wrong."

Swapnasundari was sitting in the Room of Painted Birds.

"I was wrong," she said, softly. "Birds alone can't keep you happy."

"Without birds we can't be happy either!" the women said firmly.

"Please bring back our birds, Little Princess."



But the Little Princess was so sad, she could do no more magic.

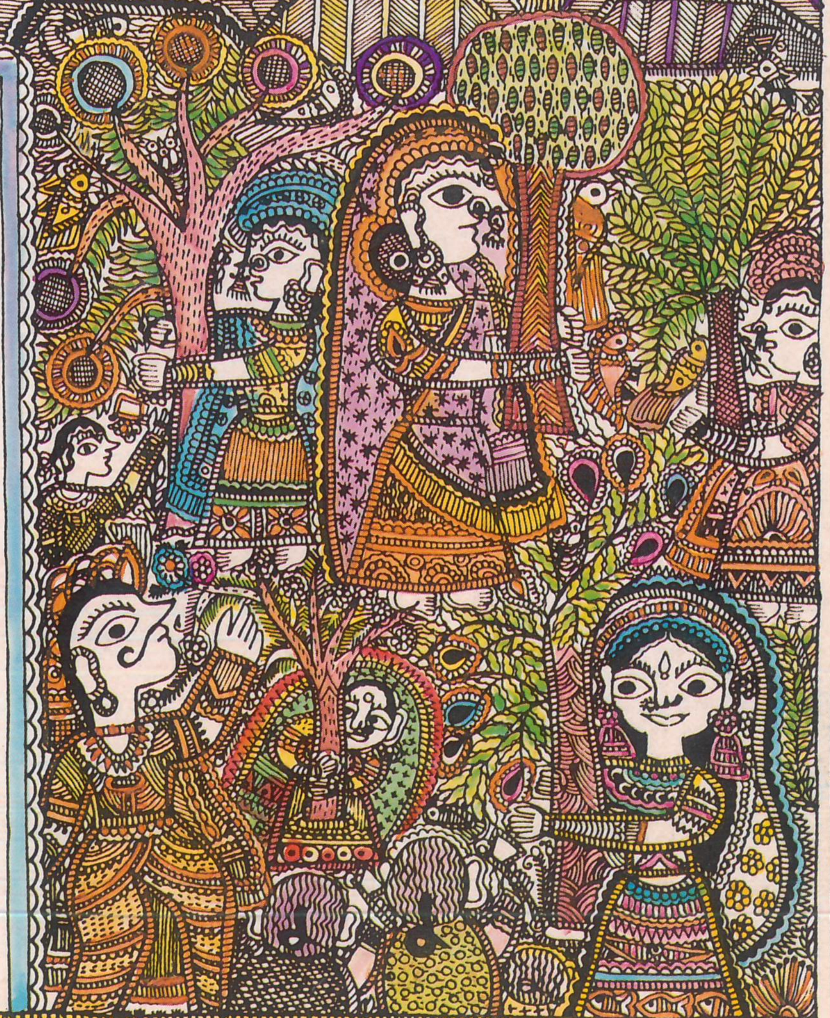
"Don't worry *we* shall do something," said the women. "Trees mean birds. We shall grow trees. And the singing birds will come back!"

"We'll help," said the men.

"And we won't let anyone cheat us!" Princess Swapnasundari and the women said in one voice.

There was an air of great celebration in the kingdom. And through the days and months, all the people worked as never before.

They sang and they danced as they sowed and they watered the plants and they laughed and clapped their hands when their plants grew tall and sturdy. Working together gave them so much joy. And this somehow made the trees grow better. Faster too!



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Soon, the fresh green of hundreds of little and big trees smiled all over Swapnasundari's kingdom. Magical music filled the air.

One day, the Little Princess Swapnasundari called the women. She said, "I have always dreamt of seeing our girls also going to school. If I'd gone to school, I'd have been wiser."

The women listened and were quiet for some time.

"Good idea! If we had gone to school, we would not have let the money lender cheat us!" said one woman.

"We'd love to go to school!" said the girls.



But many mothers said, "Our girls must help bring water, firewood. Who'll help us if they go to school?"



"True!" said the Little Princess. "But boys go to school so ..." Then she brightened.

"In my kingdom, boys shall learn all that girls do, and girls all that boys do! If all of us share the work, everything becomes more fun for everyone!"

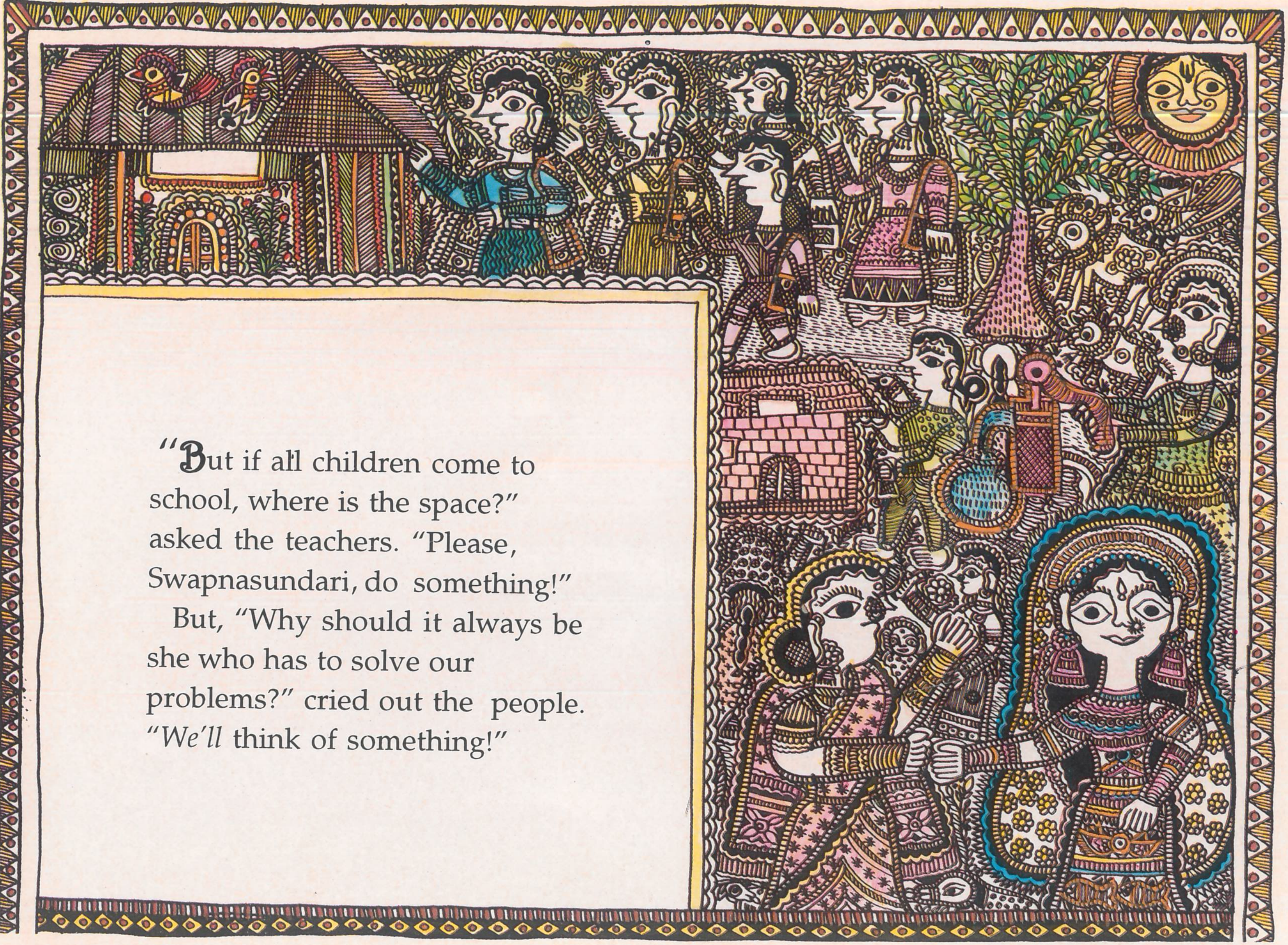


And ... every student got a special present from Swapnasundari – a bicycle! "All over the world, people who can move from one place to another, are happier because they can do more things quicker!" The Little Princess explained.

"We'd like to ride them, too!" said some women, eagerly. "Can we?"

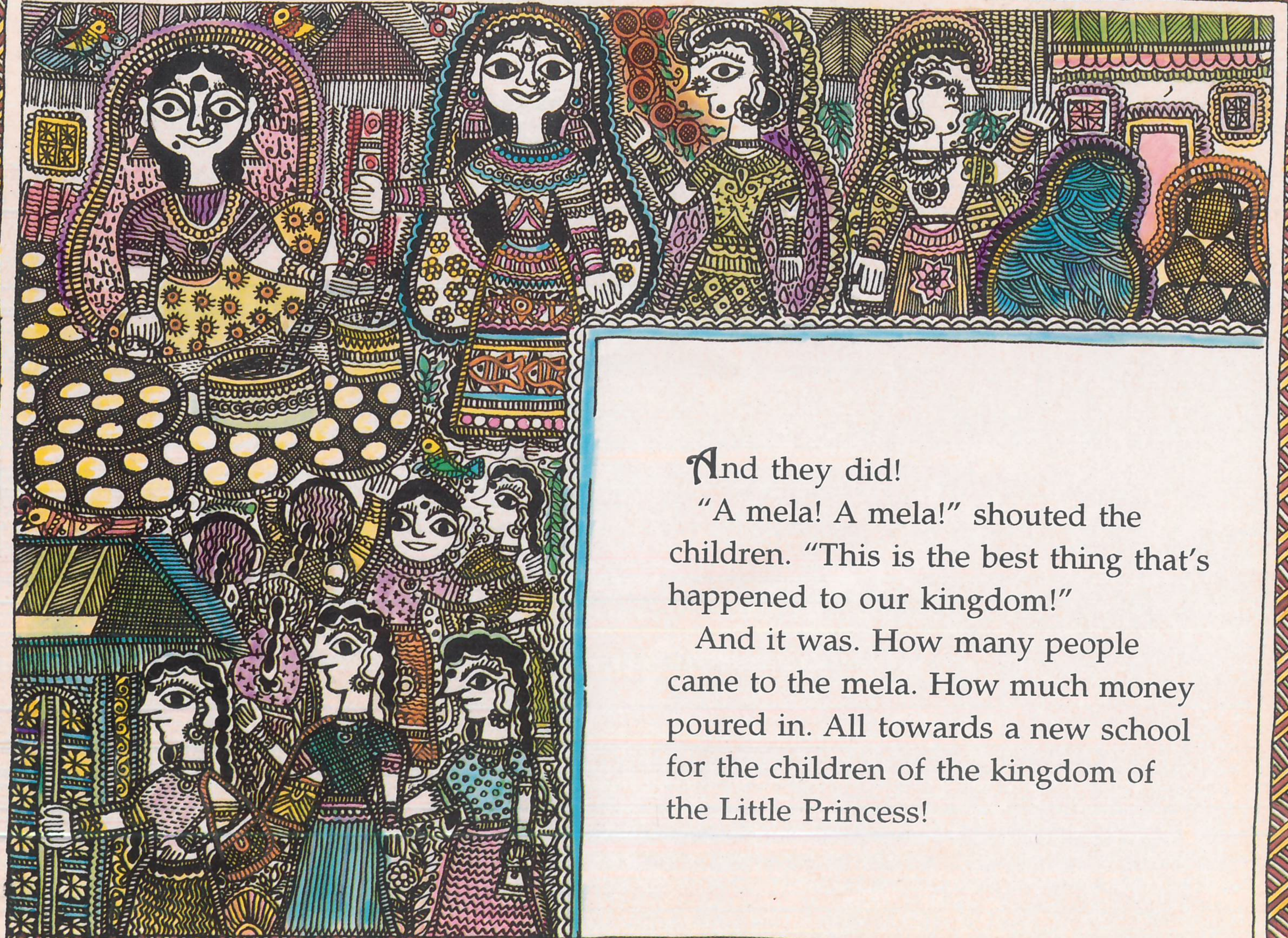
"Of course!" said Swapnasundari. "Women should be able to do anything they want to."





"But if all children come to school, where is the space?" asked the teachers. "Please, Swapnasundari, do something!"

But, "Why should it always be she who has to solve our problems?" cried out the people. "*We'll* think of something!"



And they did!

"A mela! A mela!" shouted the children. "This is the best thing that's happened to our kingdom!"

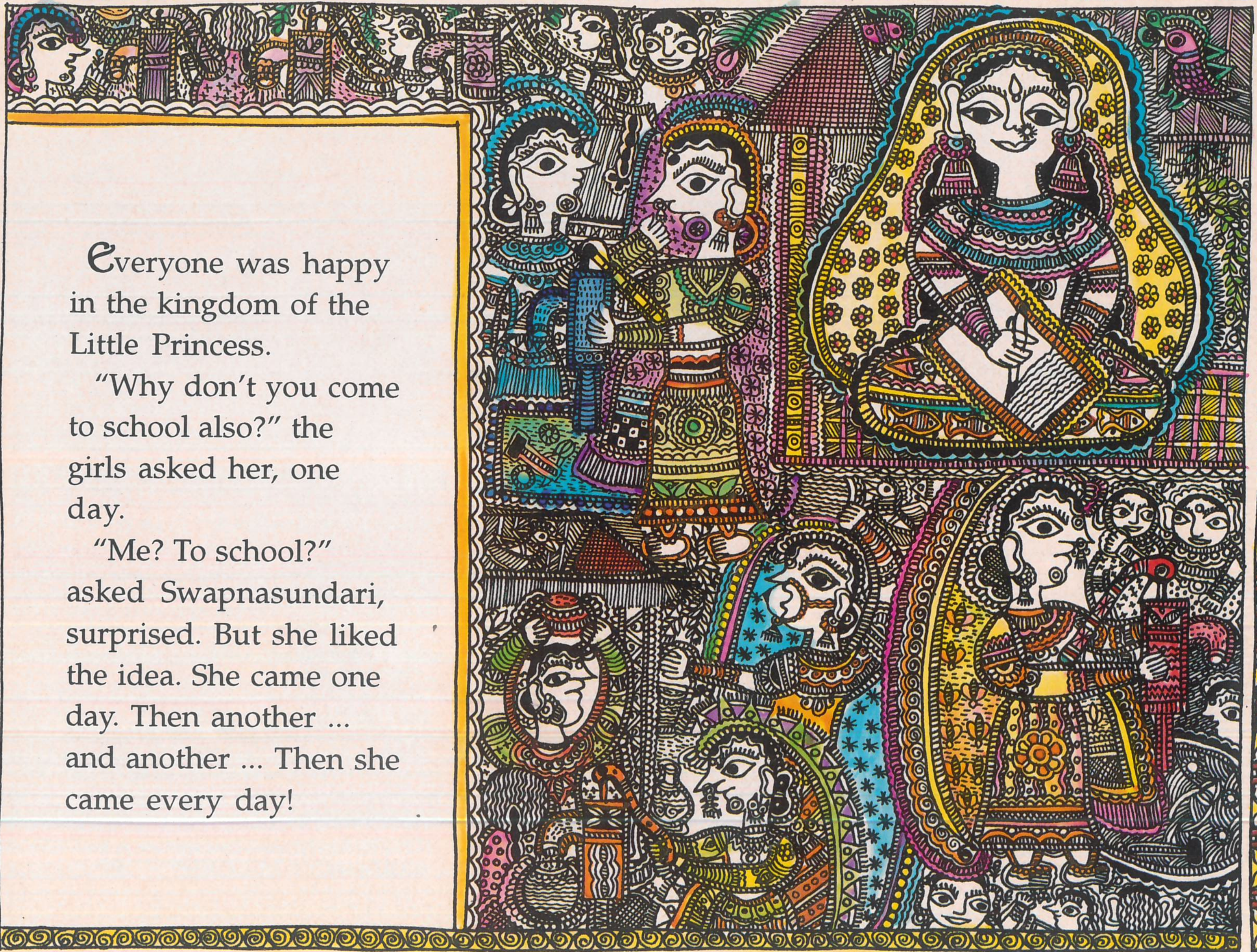
And it was. How many people came to the mela. How much money poured in. All towards a new school for the children of the kingdom of the Little Princess!



And then the whole village got together and built a new school!

"A village must work together if we want our girls to study," Swapnasundari said. "Look at Singapore. And France. And Japan. Schools are like magic."

"They make children as attractive as singing birds with wings of many colours!" said the Little Princess.



Everyone was happy in the kingdom of the Little Princess.

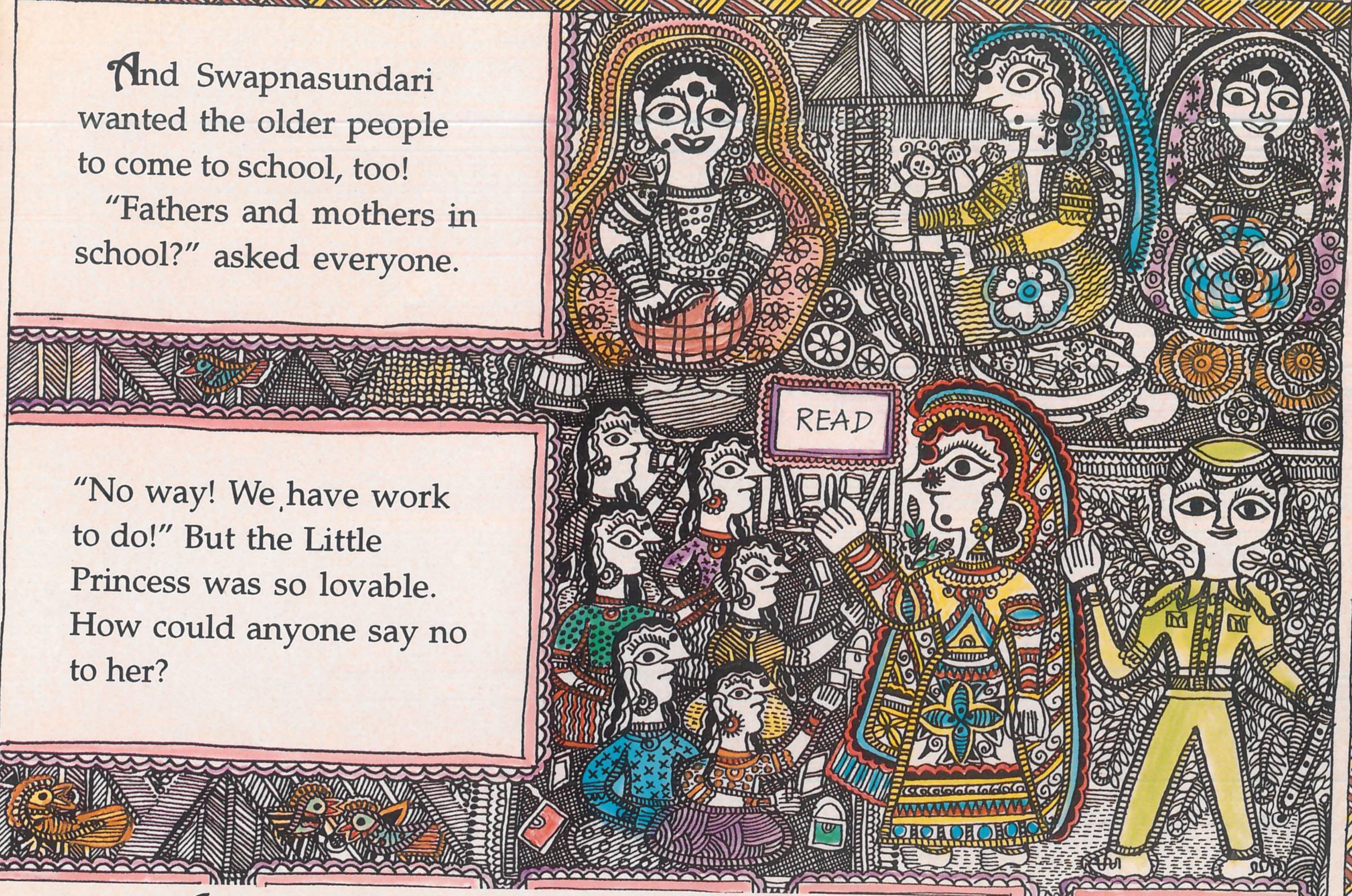
"Why don't you come to school also?" the girls asked her, one day.

"Me? To school?" asked Swapnasundari, surprised. But she liked the idea. She came one day. Then another ... and another ... Then she came every day!

And Swapnasundari wanted the older people to come to school, too!

"Fathers and mothers in school?" asked everyone.

"No way! We have work to do!" But the Little Princess was so lovable. How could anyone say no to her?



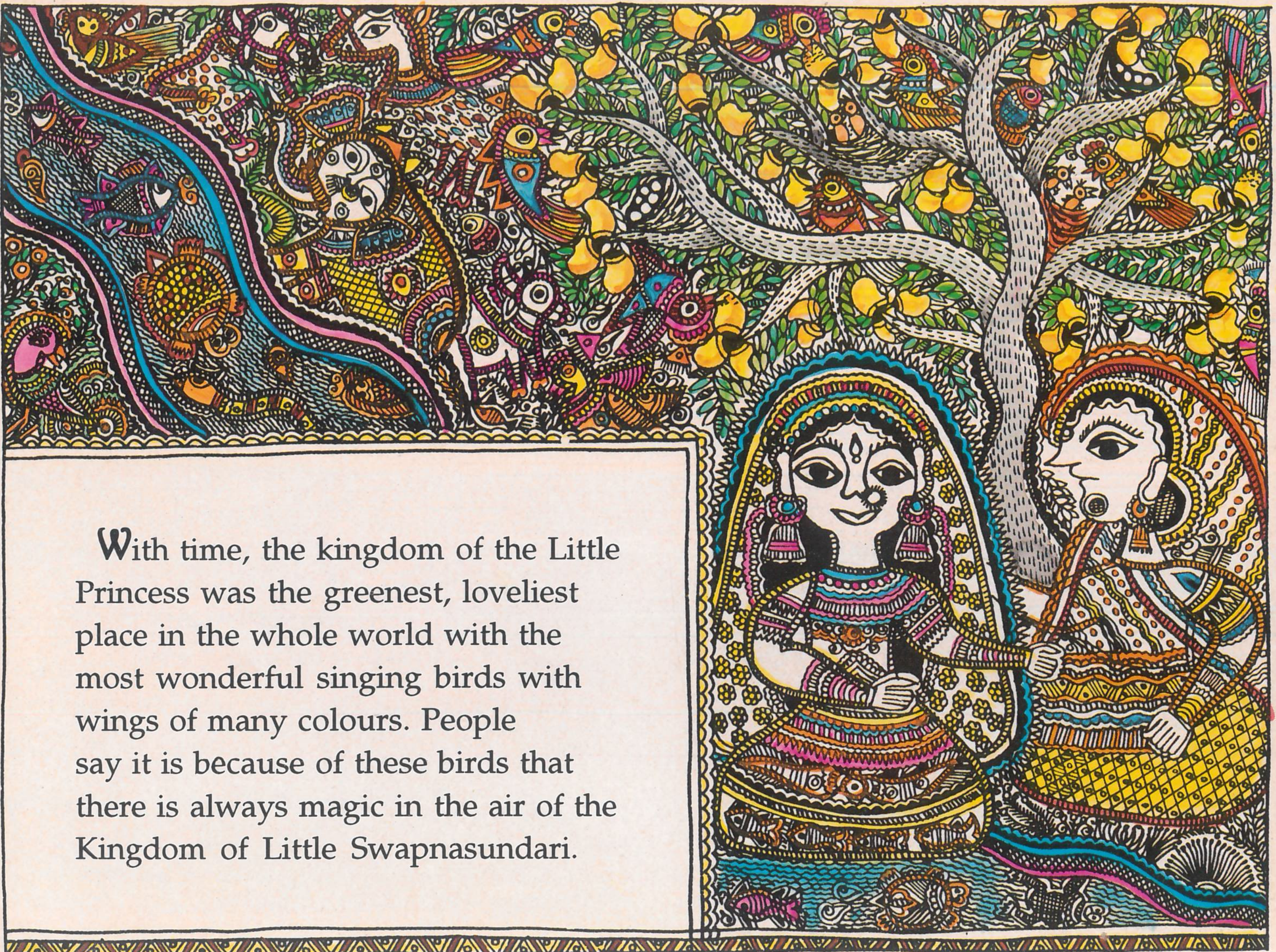
And so, fathers and mothers, came grumbling and fighting. And some of them stayed, to learn reading and writing!



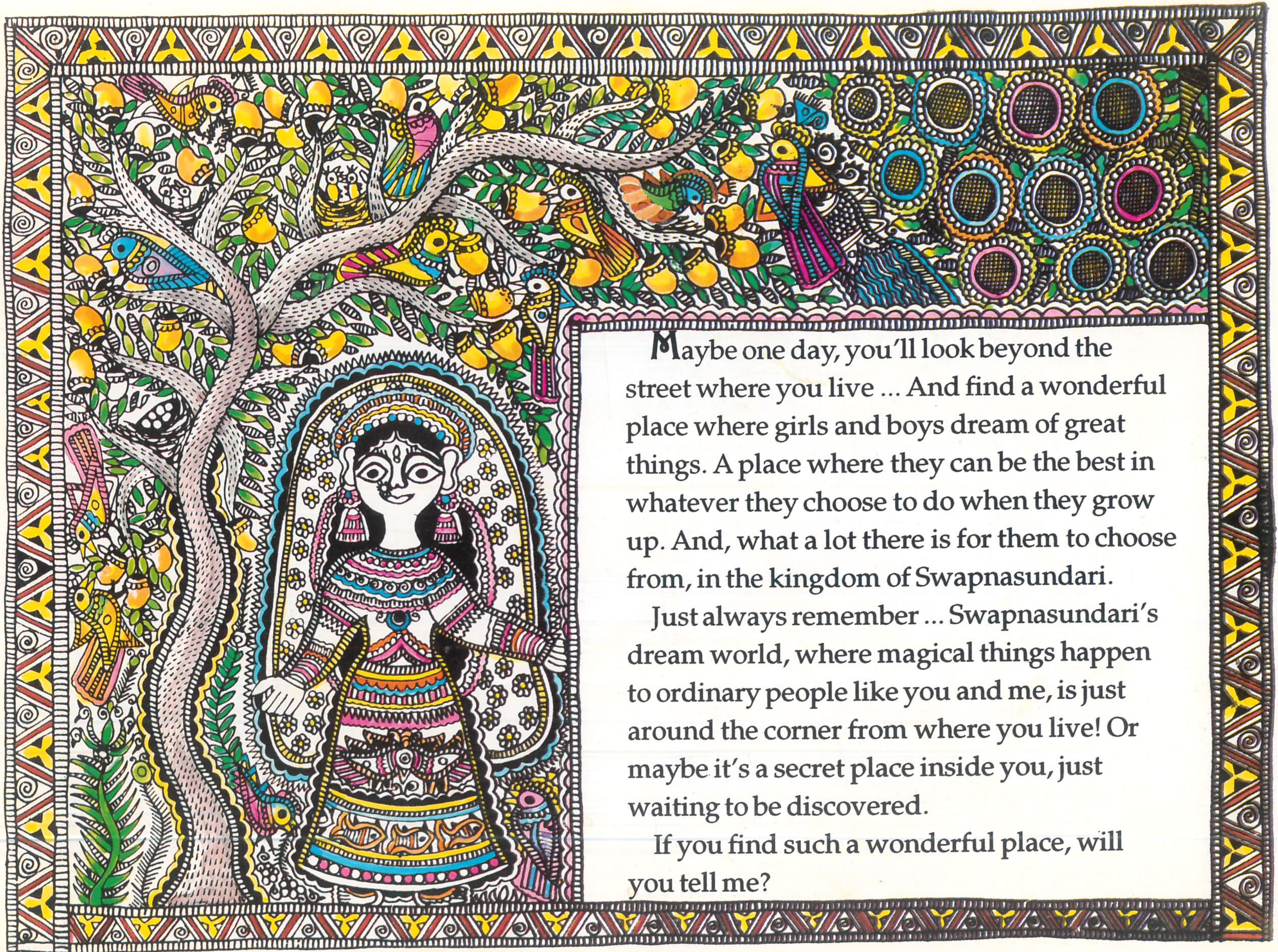
And then, the truly magical thing happened. The singing birds with the wings of many colours came back. On their own!

They had their own secret surprise. Each came bearing a thousand books in their beaks. " Beauty without knowledge is like a river without water," the magical birds chirped.

Books that make you cry or grin, books that make you think,
Books filled with laughter to the brim, books red and blue and pink!



With time, the kingdom of the Little Princess was the greenest, loveliest place in the whole world with the most wonderful singing birds with wings of many colours. People say it is because of these birds that there is always magic in the air of the Kingdom of Little Swapnasundari.



Maybe one day, you'll look beyond the street where you live ... And find a wonderful place where girls and boys dream of great things. A place where they can be the best in whatever they choose to do when they grow up. And, what a lot there is for them to choose from, in the kingdom of Swapnasundari.

Just always remember ... Swapnasundari's dream world, where magical things happen to ordinary people like you and me, is just around the corner from where you live! Or maybe it's a secret place inside you, just waiting to be discovered.

If you find such a wonderful place, will you tell me?

It was the most wonderful kingdom, the land over which the Little Princess ruled. But one day the magical singing birds of Mithila disappear. Why? How? Do the birds come back?

A heart-warming story with a difference, this exquisite book is bound to enchant and linger in the memory of a child between the ages of six and ten.

Geeta Dharmarajan is the author of thirteen books for children and is presently the editor of *Tamasha!* a children's magazine.

Moti Karn and Satyanarayan Lal Karn are two Madhubani folk artists from Bihar.

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Balkatha
A ***JALDI*** fantasy

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